

# Getting Away from SEAT TIME

*A New Hampshire initiative encourages schools to move toward competency-based learning.*

**Mary Ellen Freeley and Richard Hanzelka**

*The new vision of high school is schooling that puts students at the center of their learning.*

—Joseph DiMartino  
and John H. Clarke (2008, p. 10)

*Everything we need to know regarding how to get each student excited about his/her education is in each student's head and is available free for the asking. Education's job must be to develop skilled professionals who know how to ask the right questions and know what to do with the answers.*

—Fred Bramante, former member  
of the New Hampshire Board  
of Education (2005)

**H**ow can schools make the visions expressed by DiMartino and Clarke and by Bramante a reality? A bold, statewide initiative in New Hampshire offers one answer.

In 2005, the New Hampshire legislature passed a new set of school approval rules developed by the state board of education. This initiative, titled Follow the Child, required that schools move away from the Carnegie unit and toward a greater focus on competencies within three years. However, the initiative gave schools great flexibility in how to accomplish this goal. The following examples illus-





and alternate approaches to student assessment.

### **Extended Learning Opportunities**

A number of New Hampshire high schools have begun to offer extended learning opportunities (ELOs) designed to match their students' diverse learning needs, talents, interests, and developmental levels. An extended learning opportunity typically comes from a combination of student interest, teacher support and inspiration, and opportunities available in the community. It awards the student credit toward graduation through learning that takes place outside the traditional classroom— independent study, private instruction, internships, community service, work study, and so on.

Extended learning opportunities provide authentic learning experiences for all types of students, but they may be especially beneficial for students who struggle with the regular academic program. For example, an 18-year-old student at Manchester Central High School had failed the civics course she needed to graduate. For her extended learning opportunity, she worked at the Manchester City Hall Social Service Department. As part of the project, she created a report exploring the need for maternal health and wellness assistance for at-risk students in the community. She presented her plan to the city council and the school. Her completion of this extended learning opportunity enabled her to graduate on time (Leather, 2009).

A senior at Newfound Regional High School used the ELO process to focus on his interest in the military, which he planned to enter when he graduated. He explored the history of the military and



**A student at Oyster River High School in Durham, New Hampshire, presents her "Power of One Voice" end-of-the-year project at a community open house.**

its role in the social, political, and economic interactions that have involved Americans on an increasingly global scale. He produced a portfolio, a journal, and a final exhibition.

### ***How Extended Learning Opportunities Work***

To begin an extended learning opportunity, the student asks himself or herself, How do I like to learn? What are my interests? Why do I think an ELO would work for me? An ELO team—consisting of the student, a coordinator, a teacher, a counselor, a parent, and sometimes a community partner—meets to identify available resources and to develop a formal plan for the student to follow. Usually, the same team evaluates the success of the extended learning opportunity at the end.

Community partners are essential to extended learning opportunities. For example, four students at Laconia High School collaborated to produce a

regional drama festival of one-act plays for seven high schools. The students were involved in many hours of preplanning and communication. Among other things, they ran tech rehearsals and drama productions the day before the festival. They also planned meals for 200 people, concessions, forums, an awards ceremony, and a dance. Their community partner in this extended learning opportunity, Scott Pennington of the New Hampshire Educational Theater Guild, met regularly with the students to discuss responsibilities and procedures. Scott made himself available through e-mail and by cell phone. One important dimension of his task was to help the students reflect on their learning and to observe their developing understanding.

Assessment of student work in an extended learning opportunity typically takes place through teacher check-ins, reflections, and student exhibitions. The exhibitions are presented to a panel of

reviewers; usually, each reviewer completes a rubric showing how well the student has mastered the competencies identified as goals of the extended learning opportunity.

### **How Students Earn ELO Credits**

Most schools offering extended learning opportunities require that the ELOs align with the school's educational goals and objectives. Each school develops its own guidelines for how students may earn academic or elective credit for their extended learning opportunities.

For example, Franklin High School allows each of its approximately 400 students to earn two credits toward graduation in regular subjects or in electives through extended learning opportunities. Each ELO includes a portfolio and presentation and a community partner. This school also requires that each extended learning opportunity result in a "leave-behind" of some kind. One student participated in an extended learning opportunity on community clean-up with the help of a city sanitation department partner; her leave-behind portfolio was a recycling plan that she presented as her culminating activity. Another student, who was passionate about music and guitar, worked with a local music store and developed as his leave-behind portfolio a series of lesson plans for teaching guitar.

Additional examples of extended learning opportunities at Franklin have included the following:

■ **Youth government.** A student worked with the city manager to put together a youth government week that enabled high school students to experience how municipalities work.

■ **Fire fighting.** A student worked with the fire chief, attended trainings, and created a Web page for a future fire fighters group.

■ **Cinderella Dress Program.** Two

students obtained a \$1,000 grant to set up and carry out a program to rent prom dresses for students who couldn't afford them.

■ **Photography.** A student set up an exhibit of personal art at a local bank.

Bedford High School—a new school of approximately 600 students, dedicated to developing both academic competencies (skills and knowledge, problem solving, and communication) and social and civic competencies (self-management and collaboration)—has moved quickly toward more learning-focused options for students. Extended

these four schools, 337 students participated in extended learning opportunities in the third quarter of 2008.

The Nellie Mae study found that dropout rates in the pilot schools had fallen from 7 or 8 percent in 2003 to below 4 percent in 2008. Ninety-six percent of students in the study reported they were at least moderately involved in developing their extended learning opportunity, and 65 percent reported they were extremely involved. All superintendents and school board members, as well as 83 percent of community partners and 86 percent of

## **Extended learning opportunities provide authentic learning experiences for all types of students.**

learning opportunities are one of a number of alternative credit options that Bedford offers. (Others include a senior project focused on a topic of the student's choice and interdisciplinary intersession experiences, such as a women in leadership course and hiking in the White Mountains.) Students may use extended learning opportunities to earn credit toward graduation for the school's required Wellness III course or other elective courses. Like other alternative credit options, extended learning opportunities are graded on a pass/fail basis.

### **Preliminary Results of ELOs**

Through a Nellie Mae Education Foundation grant, the New Hampshire Department of Education has collected data from the first four high schools that piloted the extended learning opportunities program: Laconia High School, Franklin High School, Newfound Regional High School, and Manchester Central High School (Leather, 2009). In

guardians, reported that extended learning opportunities were "rigorously assessed" against state standards. And 100 percent of community partners, students, and guardians agreed that ELOs could be a rigorous alternative to a more traditional course. As Principal Steven Beals of Laconia High School pointed out,

Students who are engaged are capable of far greater rigor and do it without feeling overwhelmed by the expectations. We keep our focus on each student and find the item of interest or hook for his or her learning to take off.

### **Independent Learning, Internships, and Projects**

Oyster River High School, serving approximately 700 students, has approached personalized learning in a slightly different way. To date, Oyster River has not implemented extended learning opportunities, primarily because school leaders believe that doing so would result in pushback from the community. Instead, the school has



expanded independent studies by implementing an internship program, which students can choose as an elective.

The counseling staff coordinates the internship program. Internships are available at radio stations, the fire department, local businesses, and other community organizations. Some students intern in elementary and middle schools as student teachers and technology trainers. One student worked for the town designing Web pages; another worked at a hotel and moved through every facet of hotel management during a yearlong internship. Principal Laura Rogers points out that

during student internships, students journal, self-assess, and are evaluated by their supervisor in the field. Our guidance outreach counselor visits the workplace every two weeks, meets with the student, and provides the final evaluation of the intern's achievement.

As another way to personalize learning, Oyster River gives students the option of doing charitable projects instead of taking final exams in some courses. For example, students in the 9th grade World Cultures class conducted a project titled Power of One Voice. Students chose a cause, researched it, created a fund-raising initiative, and then reported back to the community during an open house. Guests at the open house—parents, community members, teachers from other departments, and former students who have graduated—use a rubric to assess the students' level of achievement. Student Prerana Nanda wrote,

This project was a turning point for me—both in a personal and an education way. The Power of One Voice experience showed me that I wanted to do something to support AADI [an education institution in India created to help children with severe disabilities, both mental and physical], but I had never really known if it was possible until completing this project. . . . I felt obligated to really



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROBERT L. HALE

**Students at Monadnock Community Connections School students paint a stairway mural and construct a game board in a stained glass geometry class.**

make a difference because the issue I was working toward changing (limited opportunities for individuals with disabilities) was my own choice.

The Power of One Voice evaluation is based on (1) a visual component that must appeal to viewers but also provide statistics, facts, and information sources related to the issue; (2) a well-organized, clearly written component that presents arguments and information supporting action on the issue; (3) an interactive component that explains and evaluates alternative and opposing policies as part of the oral presentation; and (4) an action component that explains how the student has acted on his or her issue and what others can do to take action.

By all accounts, the projects have produced great benefits. As a local news article commented,

Had 9th-graders at Oyster River High School taken final exams instead of doing an end-of-the-year project for their World Cultures class, the National Breast Cancer Foundation wouldn't have received a "\$1,000 donation... and the Cross Roads

shelter in Portsmouth wouldn't have been given boxes of soup and quilts (Claffey, 2008).

### **A Focus on Competency, Not Seat Time**

The Monadnock Community Connections School (known as MC2) in Swanzey, New Hampshire, is a small public school of choice serving high school students who want a different learning experience. Until recently, MC2 was a stand-alone school serving students from a number of surrounding districts. It is currently in a period of transition as it becomes a school within a school at Monadnock High School in fall 2010.

MC2 has used the flexibility offered by the Follow the Child initiative to focus its assessments on genuine student learning. Students meet competency requirements rather than Carnegie-based time requirements. As described on the school's Web site ([www.mc2school.org/index.php](http://www.mc2school.org/index.php)),

MC2 does not give grades but focuses on comprehensive performance assessment.



This means students are evaluated on their ability to demonstrate their learning and apply that learning in meaningful ways.

Principal Kim Carter says, "Everything is a learning opportunity. Students apply, document, and publicly defend what they have learned."

Rather than spend a set amount of time in particular grades, students progress through four *phases*. Because students move at their own pace, they can complete high school in fewer than four years.

A graduation checklist details the expectations for each phase. When a student decides that he or she has completed all components of a phase, the student prepares a gateway portfolio and presents an exhibition—a public presentation of individual learning, often supported by a digital portfolio. Students articulate what they have learned, how they are applying that learning, and how they will build on that learning (what their future goals are). Students are expected to defend their work to an evaluating panel, including parents, teachers, other students, and outside reviewers. This panel completes a rubric during the presentation and then meets with the student to discuss the end-of-phase presentation. The student also completes a self-assessment.

One of this article's authors (Richard Hanzelka) recently participated as a reviewer for a phase-three gateway presentation by Anna Toegel, a student who had a history of noninvolvement in school learning. In fact, a year and a half earlier Anna had been ready to drop out of high school. Her portfolio and presentation were a credit to her and to the program. Rigor and relevance were clearly evident in the gateway experience.

For example, Anna described the many skills she had developed in her

"Adapt or Die" biology class, including problem solving, questioning, creative thinking, and self direction. She explained how participating in a stem cell debate had required extensive study of the issues. She included in her portfolio a 13-page paper on multiple personality disorders. She also described

## "Students who are engaged are capable of far greater rigor."

her participation in the Pegasus Communication for Systems Thinking Conference in Boston, where she and four other students had done a presentation describing the learning program at MC2. She commented,

There are days when I am still in shock by how my experience has turned out. If two years ago someone had told me that I would someday enjoy school, I would have laughed in their face. If I had been told that I would be confident in who I am and I would be happy with what I have contributed to my school, I would have rolled my eyes. If I had been told I would someday willingly and successfully accomplish college-level portfolios while still a junior in high school, I would have thought they were absolutely insane.

### Just the Start

Since passage of the Follow the Child initiative, New Hampshire has seen movement toward personalized learning across the state. Schools are using the flexibility provided by the state legislation to interpret and apply this concept in a variety of ways.

Some educators and parents have expressed concern, of course. They question changing from a grading system that everyone "understands" to multiple measures designed to promote mastery learning. Some cite the difficulty

that students who have received fewer traditional grades may encounter when they apply for admission to college. Others cite the problems in determining how student load will be determined for teachers as more students opt for extended learning opportunities.

As educators are aware, it takes time and commitment on the part of many people to accomplish change in a school district. New Hampshire has made a decision to effect change in a whole state. It's clear that the task will not be easy, nor will it take place rapidly. It's also clear that, throughout the state, large numbers of educators are committed to the idea of personalized learning. No other state has made a similar effort to move beyond the traditional idea that time is the primary factor in learning. As the New Hampshire effort continues to expand, and as multiple measures of student learning become more acceptable, all educators will gain knowledge that will help make the next steps in learner-centered education possible. **EL**

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**Mary Ellen Freeley** is Associate Professor at St. John's University in Queens, New York; [freeley@mstjohns.edu](mailto:freeley@mstjohns.edu). **Richard Hanzelka** is Professor at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa; [HanzelkaRichard@sa.edu](mailto:HanzelkaRichard@sa.edu).